DOCUMENT RESUME

ED 372 637 FL 022 334

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TITLE Teaching English in Primary School: A Project To Introduce a Third Language to Eight Year Olds.
PUB DATE Mar 94
NOTE 21p.; Paper presented at the Annual Meeting of the Teachers of English to Speakers of Other Languages (28th, Baltimore, MD, March 8-12, 1994).
PUB TYPE Reports - Descriptive (141) -- Speeches/Conference Papers (150)

EDRS PRICE MF01/PC01 Plus Postage.
DESCRIPTORS Basque; Elementary Education; *English (Second Language); FLES; Foreign Countries; *Interference (Language); *Language Role; *Multilingualism; Program Descriptions; Second Language Instruction; Second Language Programs; Spanish; Uncommonly Taught Languages
IDENTIFIERS *Spain (Basque Provinces); University of the Basque Country (Spain)

ABSTRACT

A project introducing English as a third language in 30 elementary schools in the Basque Country (Spain) is described. The program, emerging from a national curriculum reform effort, begins English instruction when students are eight years old, three years earlier than previously. Students are already bilingual in Spanish and Basque, both official languages, and some feel that because the two languages are not related, students experience some confusion in learning both. Addition of a third, also unrelated language is seen as a special challenge in this area. At the program's inception in 1992, the University of the Basque Country was designated as the coordinating institution. Teachers were trained in English language instruction in the United Kingdom and had regular meetings for discussing instructional issues and exchanging ideas. An activity-based and thematic syllabus evolved from this process. Program coordinators observed classrooms several times a year. A formative evaluation used observation, an attitude survey of teachers, parents, and administrators, a teacher survey, and English language testing. Results suggest the program fostered a favorable attitude toward English language teaching, highlight the important role of the teacher, and provided a significant opportunity for teacher development. Areas for improvement were also identified. A bibliography is included. (MSE)

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TITLE: TEACHING ENGLISH IN PRIMARY SCHOOL: A PROJECT TO INTRODUCE A THIRD LANGUAGE TO EIGHT YEAR OLDS

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KEY WORDS: primary education, second language acquisition, English language.

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TEACHING ENGLISH IN PRIMARY SCHOOL: A PROJECT TO INTRODUCE A THIRD LANGUAGE TO EIGHT YEAR OLDS IN THE BASQUE COUNTRY

ABSTRACT

This paper describes a project carried out in thirty schools in the Basque Country during the academic year 1992-93 to introduce a foreign language -in this case English- to eight-year-olds three years earlier than previously.

The paper looks briefly at the situation of teaching primary English in the Basque Country and then goes on to describe the aims and implementation of the project. The paper further analyses the general attitudes towards the project, the process of teacher development and the progress in language learning.

Finally, some concluding remarks are made concerning the implications of the project.

INTRODUCTION

Foreign language instruction in primary school is not a recent phenomenon. Some years ago, several projects to teach foreign languages in the primary school were started in the United States and Europe (Burstall et al., 1974; Khan, 1991; Rhodes & Oxford, 1988; Stern & Weinrib, 1977) but these experiments did not always fulfill their expectations and young learners did not show a significant advantage over older learners. These poor linguistic results, which have often been included in the 'optimal age' debate (Singleton, 1989), have taken the focus away from other interesting aspects of the process of teaching foreign languages to young learners. For example, the NFER evaluation on the acquisition of French in England (Burstall et al., 1974) reflects the important differences among the teachers' linguistic and methodological training as well as the problem of heterogenous grouping at the secondary school level where young starters were mixed with other students. These issues, less often mentioned, are also important factors that affected the results of this primary school experiment (Rixon, 1992). Other primary English projects such as the Bangalore Project (Brumfit, 1984) and the Singapore Primary Project (Williams, 1991) have been reported to be more successful. Reports from Canadian immersion programmes in primary French are also positive in their linguistic and non-linguistic outcomes (Brewster, Ellis & Girard, 1992; Genesee, 1987; Swain & Lapkin, 1982).

The closer links within the European Community and the

opening of Eastern Europe have revived the interest in primary English in recent years. English is already part of the primary school curriculum in European countries such as Austria, Denmark or Holland, and there are experimental projects to bring English to the primary school in other countries: Spain, France, Italy, Hungary, Czechoslovakia, Poland and Bulgaria (Asher, 1990; Rixon, 1992). This revival has grown parallel to new teacher-training programmes and new syllabuses, materials and methodological proposals (Brumfit, Moon & Tongue, 1991; Ellis & Brewster, 1991; Kennedy & Jarvis, 1991).

Without entering the optimal age debate, Brumfit (1991) states that teaching English at the primary level can present several advantages because it provides more learning time, an early start in the understanding of modern cultures and a link between communication and the understanding of new concepts.

This paper reports a project carried out in the Basque Autonomous Community with eight-year-old primary school children who learn English as a third language.

THE PRIMARY ENGLISH PROJECT IN THE BASQUE COUNTRY

Background

The Spanish National Curriculum Reforms has proposed far-reaching changes in the primary and secondary educational systems, including the area of foreign languages. Most significantly, instruction in the foreign language now begins when the children are eight years old, that is three years earlier than previously. Furthermore, in order to improve the

quality of second language instruction, the 'Reforma' has also made recommendations regarding the methods and materials to be used, in an attempt to reflect more recent developments in language teaching and learning.

The initial guidelines emphasized communicative competence, learner-centred syllabuses, cooperation and coordination among teachers, plus new evaluation criteria. They also allow for a slight decrease in the number of students in the classroom. (Diseño Curricular Base, 1992)

In the Basque Country the National Reforms for foreign languages pose an added challenge, since it is a bilingual community where another official language, apart from Spanish, exists at all levels of education. Instruction is available in Spanish or Basque or in both languages. Most native speakers of Basque, that is approximately 25% of the population, have decided that their education will be through the Basque language, but an increasing number of Spanish native speakers are also choosing a Basque education. This increasing social pressure to develop instruction in Basque has involved an enormous effort on the part of primary and secondary Spanish speaking teachers to learn Basque and to be able to teach through this language (Eusko Ikaskuntza, 1990).

However, Basque, unlike other languages in the Iberian Peninsular, is a non-Indo European language. It is not related to either Spanish or English, although it includes a large number of loan words from Spanish and French. Despite the results of several evaluations which have reported that instruction through the minority language, Basque, has positive linguistic effects (Valencia & Cenoz, 1992; Sierra & Olaziregi, 1989,1990), it is

still felt by some parents, and to some extent teachers, that the children are already confused by learning two languages. Therefore it has been muted that the introduction of a third language will only serve to further confuse, especially since the children are introduced to reading and writing in the second language, Basque or Spanish, at precisely at this age.

On the other hand, there has been a dramatic increase in the last ten years in the choice of English as the major foreign language to the detriment of French, despite the proximity of the Basque Country to France. In 1992, English was chosen by 94% of the students in the Basque Autonomous Community. It has been necessary, therefore, to retrain Primary school teachers (many of them ex-French teachers) without a specialist qualification in English, to cope with this demand, created by the popularity of English and the National Reforms.

The Basque Primary School Project

In 1992, thirty schools applied and were chosen by the Basque Government as part of a project to teach English to eight year olds before such a policy became obligatory in October 1993. The government arranged a six-week training session in the U.K., provided funds for purchasing materials in each school and provided for an appropriate institution to take responsibility for the coordination and internal evaluation of the project.

In 1992-3, this task was undertaken by The Institute of Pedagogy of Languages at the University of the Basque Country. The thirty schools came from three provinces of the Basque Country. Twenty three of the centres were state schools, with the

remaining seven being state subsidised.

The teachers had very different levels of English, from lower-intermediate to advanced, and varying years of experience, both in teaching (1 to 23 years) and teaching English (1 to 13 years). Only 8 of them had any experience with 8 year olds, so one of the main preoccupations at the start of the year was how to adjust English language teaching to this younger age group and prepare materials and activities appropriate to their interests and cognitive level.

The principal objectives for the project, following the guidelines of the 'Reforma', were primarily to develop positive attitudes towards learning English by creating an enjoyable atmosphere in the classroom. In this way, language learning would take place through meaningful communication related to activities and topics which were interesting to the children and which would contribute to their global education. A further aim was to provide for teacher development in the new arena of teaching a third language to young learners.

For purposes of coordination, the teachers divided into four groups. They were released from the school timetable in order to meet once a week together, and once a fortnight with the project pedagogic coordinators from the Institute of Pedagogy of Languages. The meetings provided a forum for debating issues relating to the teaching of eight-year-olds, an opportunity to exchange ideas and materials and a chance to feedback on the classroom practice.

The type of syllabus that evolved as a result of the teachers' practice and planning was activity-based and focussed on different topics, e.g.animals, clothes, festivals, family and

friends, the body etc.

By 'activity' we imply a 'communicative task' which David Nunan has defined as a "...piece of classroom work which involves learners in comprehending, manipulating, producing or interacting in the target language while their attention is principally focused on meaning rather than form" (Nunan, 1989).

Activities were developed or selected if they were deemed to be of their interest to the child, to have a purpose which was obvious and concrete to the child, to build on the child's background cognitive and social knowledge or awareness, to be challenging but not threatening, to be open with possible different solutions and to involve language input or language practice.

The types of activities used included handicrafts, physical activities, story-telling, project-work, drama, and songs and rhymes.

The coordinators visited the teachers in their centres on average three times during the year. The observations had to be handled very delicately so as not to be seen as a threat and intrusion, since it is not a common teacher-development strategy in the Basque Country and unfortunately, in most cases, the teachers' timetables excluded the possibility of them visiting each other's schools and conducting peer observation. Most of the teachers during the year were introduced to the idea of using video cameras in the classroom, not only to use with the children and record the children's work but also as a tool for self-observation.

The visits to the schools gave the coordinators a clear idea of the classroom reality; numbers, classroom conditions,

behaviour etc. in order to ensure the relevance and workability of the materials prepared. The visits also served to provide the teachers with a further classroom 'aid', to use as they wished in the classroom and to allow the children to meet a native speaker of English, thereby stimulating their interest in language and providing an opportunity for genuine social interaction. It was also a time for the teacher and coordinator to meet and work together, on a one-to-one level, on issues directly relevant to the individual teacher, and to answer any questions from directors or other members of staff in the school relating to the project.

Evaluation

The primary English project was evaluated as it was being implemented. This programme evaluation was not just an 'assessment' because it analyzed a wide range of procedures and involved the collection of data in order to form value judgements and make decisions (Nunan, 1993).

Tha aims of the evaluation, adapting Alderson's (1992) taxonomy of purposes for evaluation to our context, were the following: i) to identify what effect the project would have and ii) to identify areas for improvement.

The main recipients of the evaluation were the teachers who also took part by discussing their own practice, both during school visits and training sessions. Triangulation was used for the collection of the data and the main sources of information were the following:

Training sessions. As has already been stated, one of the main activities at these sessions was to discuss teaching strategies and problems.

Observations. Observations proved to be one of the best sources of information not only for the teachers' and trainers' feedback but also for general evaluation. The observations provided first hand information about the teacher's competence in English, the teacher's confidence, his/her control of the class, the children's attitude and teaching conditions.

Attitude questionnaires. The parents, tutors and school directors filled in questionnaires which included items on the perception of the possible linguistic and non-linguistic effects of the project on the development of Basque, Spanish and other school subjects. A total of 500 families, 30 English teachers, 12 tutors and 25 school directors answered these questionnaires.

Teacher's questionnaires. Apart from the continuous feedback which was received from the teachers during the year, the teachers were asked to fill in a questionnaire in May 1993. The questionnaire included items on the general evaluation of the project, the teachers' perception of the children's attitude, their assessment of the materials used during the year, frequency of the different activities and remarks about areas of improvement.

English tests. Tests of listening comprehension and oral production were administered during the school timetable at the

end of the year. The listening comprehension test (min=0; max= 52) included a picture dictation, a number dictation and two multiple-choice picture tests. A total of 368 students completed all the subtests of the listening comprehension and 142 students participated in the oral test. The oral task (min=0; max=36) involved individual production and group interaction. The children had to describe and discuss a picture, first individually and then in groups.

OUTCOMES AND DISCUSSION

The evaluation of the primary English project, both process and product, was seen as necessary for at least two reasons. One reason is that implementing Primary English in our community is very demanding for teachers, schools and educational authorities because it requires the adoption of new methodologies and materials and a high level of competence in English oral skills on the part of the teacher. On the other hand, starting English with eight-year-olds, means that the children will have had eight years of English by the time they finish their compulsory education at 16. It should not be unreasonable to expect an acceptable competence in English after so many years of study and therefore some evaluation of classroom practices and results is necessary in order to check the consequences of this innovation.

Clearly, both process and product oriented evaluations have important roles to play when analyzing the implementation of a foreign language project, but the preference for a process oriented evaluation was closely related to the aims of the project and the specific purposes of the evaluation. This type

of evaluation involved the teachers and teacher-trainers and was able to provide information about the way the project was taking place, that is, qualitative information about the teaching and learning strategies, the materials, the syllabus and the main problems found during the year. This information was extremely profitable as feedback for trainers and teachers from the very beginning of the academic year. Observations and training sessions certainly affected the development of the project and also provided complementary classroom-based data for the evaluation of the teachers' and children's attitudes towards the project. A combination of qualitative and quantitative procedures was used to identify the linguistic effect of the project. An experimental design to measure this project presented serious limitations due to the general aims of the project, the practical purposes of the evaluation and the special conditions in which the project took place. The first problem associated with experimental design was the impossibility of obtaining information regarding the long-term benefits of primary English or the advantages and disadvantages of starting English at this age group rather than with older or younger children. Furthermore, the educational environment where the project took place did not allow for the possibility of experimental or quasi-experimental designs due to the lack of control groups. The children who were not taking part in the project had no English at all so it was impossible to compare different methodological approaches.

The outcomes of the project will be discussed under three headings; 'Attitudes', 'Teachers' and 'English' which, in turn, correspond to the three general aims of the project.

Attitudes

One of the aims of the project, in line with the National Reform, was to develop positive attitudes towards learning the English language. The role of contextual and affective elements in second and foreign language acquisition has been widely recognized (Gardner, 1985; Giles & Coupland, 1991; Larsen-Freeman & Long, 1991, Skehan, 1989). Parental attitudes and expectations have also been reported (Gardner, 1985; Gardner & Clément, 1990) to play an important role in foreign language acquisition when the target language is not present in the community. The role of attitudes can be especially relevant in the case of third language acquisition within a bilingual educational system.

The information assembled from different sources showed that the project was taking place in a very supportive atmosphere. All the tutors and directors who answered the questionnaire perceived that learning English was going to have either positive or neutral effects for the linguistic development of the children. The Primary English project was also strongly supported by the majority of the parents who answered the questionnaire (99%). Although it could be argued that only those parents that support the project returned the questionnaires, the high proportion of questionnaires received (72%), and the expected effects perceived by the parents must be regarded as very positive.

The teachers' questionnaires also showed that their own attitude towards the project was either very positive (80%) or positive (20%) and the teachers' attitudes were also reported as very favourable by the teacher-trainers.

The observation and external assessment reports highlighted

the children's positive attitude. These attitudes were also confirmed by the teachers' questionnaires where it was perceived either as positive (50%) or very positive (50%). The teachers' and tutors' comments also showed that in many cases English had become the most popular school subject. The children's positive attitudes seem to be strongly associated with the enjoyment they experience in the English class, and their positive effect on foreign language achievement has been reported in different contexts (Burstall et al., 1974; Gardner, 1985).

The teacher

One of the aims of the Primary English project was to train the English language teachers to use methodological approaches which focus on language use and are suitable for this age group. The role of the teacher seems to be particularly relevant in the first year of English, when the first contact with the language is established.

The teacher's competence in the target language, which has been regarded as essential in Primary School (Brumfit, 1991), and the teacher's confidence when using English will certainly mean more adequate input, and it is important to notice that the teacher is the most important source of input for young children in foreign language teaching situations. One of the findings from the observations of primary classrooms involved in this project, was that confidence with the language and the methodology seemed to be more important than linguistic competence in English (measured by self-assessment reports, observation reports and official certificates of English), because confident teachers

gave more opportunities for using the language in meaningful contexts. Experience in primary practice was also found to be important, since teachers who were working with this age group for the first time and who were used to more traditional methods, often felt uncomfortable in the class.

Classroom observations showed that activities such as colouring were often used by the teachers as a strategy to control the class after more exhausting and energetic oral activities. The priority of oral skills and the use of a topic-based syllabus imply a more flexible approach to teaching English that can positively affect the child's motivation but, at the same time, demands more effort on part of the teacher to control the class.

The training sessions and the teachers' questionnaires revealed that the teachers were satisfied with the methodological approach and the materials used in this project. The teachers also insisted on the need for teachers' meetings and teacher cooperation in the future.

The English language

The development of the English language was one of the main focuses of interest during the academic year. This development was informally assessed by the teachers (for example, by keeping notes in a diary) and discussed at the training sessions. The language development was also analysed through the teachers' questionnaires, the observations and the tests of English.

The teachers were quite satisfied with the children's English although some teachers used to working with older

learners remarked than younger children seemed to progress very slowly. They also valued the fact that the chidren were using the language for communicative purposes and that this was possible without a formal knowledge of the language.

Video recordings, taken by the observers or the teachers themselves, showed the extensive use of English by the teacher as the vehicle for all aspects of the classroom management. They also served to demonstrate not only the children's linguistic output during specific activities, but also their spontaneous utterances.

The external measurement of achievement in English after one year of implementation of the project presented serious limitations due to the lack of control groups. However, tests were carried out because they were expected by the schools, and to some extent the teachers.

The chidren achieved high scores on the listening, M=46.51; S.D. 4.05, (max=50) and oral tests, M=30.45; S.D.= 4.61, (max=45). Although the test scores cannot tell much about the appropriateness of the methodological approach or the long term effect of the programme they are useful in several ways. One of the findings was the children's positive reaction to an external evaluator who addressed them exclusively in English. This reaction confirms the positive attitudes towards learning English and the use of English as the language of classroom communication. The tests also showed that, even after aproximately seventy hours of instruction, the children could use the appropriate language in its context. Finally, the tests were used to corroborate the information about the teachers obtained in the observations. It was established that those classes with

more management problems and less confident teachers tended to achieve the lowest results, especially on the oral production test.

Final remarks

The evaluation of the Primary English Project shows that the direct and indirect participants in the experience presented a very favourable attitude towards teaching or learning English from the age of eight. This positive attitude will certainly help the linguistic development and implementation of the project in the future.

Another finding of the project was the relevance of the teacher and especially, the teacher's personality, training and experience which were reported to be more influential than the teaching conditions. The teacher, who has been undervalued in learner-centred approaches, is certainly crucial in Primary English; 'Long years of experience have shown that the most important factor is the teacher. Without a suitable teacher, teaching young children becomes impracticable' (Fröhlich-Ward 1991, 98).

The project proved to be useful for teacher development as teachers took a more critical look at their teaching and started to get used to sharing and implementing ideas and proposals. The project established the basi s for more systematic action research that could take place in the future.

The evaluation also helped to identify areas of improvement. For example, it was found that the time devoted to non-linguistic activities, such as colouring, could be used for other activities

that could also help to maintain the control of the class and at the same time provide richer linguistic input. Other areas of improvement which were identified include the development of teachers' confidence and cooperation among teachers.

English language teaching projects have been reported to be very complex because they involve a large set of individual, educational and environmental variables (Williams & Burden, 1994). Even though only some of the elements involved in the Primary English Project in the Basque Country have been presented and discussed here, the findings show that attitudes and teacher variables are influential elements in the implementation of a project. These elements are especially interesting at the primary level because to a certain extent they are open to modification and, can, therefore always be improved.

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